

THE PLEASANT ANARCHY OF LIFE

Proposal for a one-hour documentary

Afghanistan. No other territory has been more thoroughly traversed, nor has grown into such a complex melting-pot. Slavic, Indian, Persian, Turkish, Arab, central Asian and European bloods were spilled and blended on its soil. Before the wars of the last two decades, Afghanistan had an otherworldly character, reflected in the pleasant anarchy of life, the medieval civility of its people, and their unaffected aloofness from the modern world. Seekers of wisdom, both the serious and the starry-eyed, sought the counsel of Sufi mystics or their imitators. The natural sense of moderation of the people had always kept extremes of religious behaviour in check. Only under the cataclysmic influence of the Soviets were religious leaders able to gain exceptional power.

This is the portrait of Afghanistan painted by the British writer Jason Elliot in his much-acclaimed «An Unexpected Light», a beautiful poetic book about his travels in Afghanistan, published in London in 1999.

It is a portrait confirmed by the Afghans I have met in Montreal. It is the Afghanistan they remember before they fled in the 1980s. It is the Afghanistan they yearn for, and want to help re-build. The film I propose would be about two Afghan immigrants in Montreal who have exceptional organizational skills, and who have strong visions of how to use these skills in helping to re-establish "the pleasant anarchy of life" that once ruled in Kabul. The film would follow them home.

6 million Afghans have fled their country over the past two decades, forming half of the world's population of refugees. 50,000 have found their way to Canada. Most of them were professionals back home, and able to pay their way here. 5,000 of them are in Montreal. Most of them are Dari-speaking Tajiks from Kabul, where they form 25% of the population. In Montreal, they concentrate in the rows of duplex houses of white brick that are to be found in the working class suburbs of Laval, St. Leonard and Longueuil. Large families cram into six and a half room apartments, because the professional qualifications of the older people are not recognized here, so one or two younger

members of the next generation have to support the family while other siblings finish their higher education.

I have got to know two members of the Fazel family. Hasibullah, 30 years old, and his sister Roshana, 29. Quite extraordinary people. Very articulate in French and English as well as in Dari and Pashtu. Well established in Quebec society, with professional job skills, yet well informed and very passionate about Afghan culture and history.

Hazan
Two things happened in December of last year that transformed their lives. They heard Dr. Sima Samar speak of her vision for a new multi-ethnic egalitarian Afghanistan when she was awarded the John Humphrey Freedom Award in Montreal on December 10. And then on December 22, they stayed up all night to watch the swearing in of the new government in Kabul, with Dr. Samar as deputy premier and minister of women's and children's affairs, and with Dr. Suhaila Seddiqi as minister of health. Dr. Seddiqi is their father's cousin. These appointments made them believe that there could be a role for them to play in re-building the country.

Hasibullah and Roshana are distant relatives of the king who was deposed in 1973. Their grandfather was a grape farmer and a general in the king's army. Their father was a manager in the country's electrical network. Their mother was a school teacher of math and language in a French school. They fled the Soviet regime with their five children in 1982. Hasibullah was 12 and Roshana was 10.

Hasibullah lives in Longueuil with his wife Zara-Sha, a painter and poet who is studying optics. Hasibullah is studying engineering at UQAM, having completed his baccalaureat in geology. He is founding president of Info-Afghan, which started two years ago with a weekly hour-long programme on community TV. Now twenty young adults meet weekly under his guidance to lay plans for a web-site on Afghan culture and history, to be available in French, English, Dari and Pashtu. It will be related to an Afghan research

centre which Hasibullah is helping to develop with les Psychologues Sans Frontières, located at l'Université de Montréal. Info-Afghan is also organizing a major spectacle for the Montreal Afghan community at the end of February to celebrate the Muslim festival of Kurban, and the end of the Taliban regime. It will feature Nasrat Parsa, the very popular Afghan singer who is a friend of Hasibullah's and who now lives in Germany.

Hasibullah believes that the heart of Afghanistan can be found in Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam which teaches that enlightenment can be achieved through disciplinary routines in meditation, breathing, writing, music and dance. Sufism has inspired many of the country's leading civil servants, scientists, generals and artists over the last thousand years. Hasibullah knows the poetry of Jalal ad-Din Rumi (13th century) and Khwaja Abdullah Ansari (15th)--two of the greatest Sufi poets. Both were Afghans. He practises Sufi discipline himself by playing the tabla and the harmonium, two traditional Afghan instruments.

Roshana is a single woman who lives in Longueuil with her parents, her twin sister Nahila, and her 12-year-old brother Barnak. She graduated from UQAM last year with a baccalaureat in inter-cultural education. She is secretary of Info-Afghan, and is responsible for its web page describing Afghanistan's 29 provinces. She works presently as a Dali-French-English interpreter at le Palais de Justice, and on February 1st will start working at le Centre Culturel International de Brossard, responsible for organizing multi-cultural exhibitions and events.

But since the events of December, Roshana has thrown her organization skills into the realisation of a dream she has had for years now--the establishment in Kabul of a residential school for orphans. It is a dream inspired (1) by what she remembers of the French school that she attended and where her mother taught in pre-war Kabul, and

(2) by what she has learned about Montreal schools through her studies at UQAM and through her younger brother's attendance at a primary school in Longueuil.

She has developed a plan for an institution which would house 1000 orphans between the ages of 2 and 18, with boys and girls integrated in classes up to grade 6. Half a dozen of the teaching staff she would recruit from Montreal, because (1) she wants to introduce creative teaching methods to challenge the rote memorizing methods that have been traditionally used in Afghanistan, and (2) she wants Afghan children to learn about Canada, and (3) she wants them to learn French as a second foreign language.

She has presented her plan to Fatima Houda-Pépin, the Liberal MLA for her riding of Brossard, and Francine Lalonde, Bloc Québécois M.P. for Mercier, and both have promised to help her seek government aid for an initial investigative trip to Kabul this spring. There she will present her plan to Ministers Samar and Seddiqi, look for an appropriate site for the school, and establish an enlistment plan for Afghan teachers, students, and after-school supervisory staff. She will also check out SUCO-Québec's programme of leadership training for women in Kabul. On her return to Montreal, she would launch a fund-raising campaign in the Afghan community here.

Hasibullah will travel with Roshana on her first trip. He wants to present the government with a proposal to establish an exchange between the Afghan Ministries of Education and Culture, Info-Afghan's internet library and the Afghan research centre at l'Université de Montréal.

Hasibullah and Roshana both want to spend equal time in Afghanistan and Canada until the school and the cultural exchange are operating. Only then will they decide in which country they will reside.

Hasibullah's decision will depend on whether his wife Zara-Sha will want to return to Kabul, a place which she left in 1992 with only bad memories--six months of imprisonment for her father, and three close relatives killed in the war with Russia.

Roshana's decision will depend on what the family decides about the future of her 12-year-old brother Barnak. He was born in Montreal, and feels at home here, even though he is harassed at school as an "Arab", which he is not.

Roshana's father has never adapted to the life of an immigrant, and has always intended to return to the house in Kabul in which he raised five of his six children. He built the house for his wife when they decided to get married. He still owns it, and has heard that it is still habitable. His wife would like to teach in Roshana's school, if only to help get it started. But that would depend on whether one of her three other older children would be willing to take care of Barnak while she is gone.

Here are the three other children (Hasibullah's and Roshana's siblings): (1) Saif, 35, is a mathematician now studying computer science. He is responsible for the technical functioning of the Info-Afghan web-site, and has written a text book for children wanting to learn Dari . He is married to an Afghan woman who was trained in London as an orthopedic surgeon, and who is now the full-time mother of two young children. (2) Mustafa, 33, has a maintenance supervisor's job at the Marriott Hotel, and is married to an Afghan wife who raises their one young child. (3) Roshana's twin sister Nahila, who is single like her sister, also works at the Marriott Hotel, like brother Musafa, but in her case as an office manager. Very different from Roshana, she has business ambitions, and wants to return to Kabul one day to open a hotel.

FILM TREATMENT

The film would establish Hasibullah and Roshana in this complex family structure as immigrants who are starting careers, playing leadership roles in community activities, and preparing themselves for lives of commitment to the re-building of Afghanistan. The tension they feel between their conflicting loyalties to Canada and Afghanistan would be sharply revealed in the opposite needs of their parents and of little Barnak in establishing a permanent home.

The film will hit its first emotional peak when Hasibullah and Roshana arrive in Kabul on their first inspection tour. They will first look for the family house, where they have strong memories of playing under a grape tree in the back yard before the war, and of finding a fatally wounded mujahidin soldier in the same yard after the Russian invasion. Between appointments in government ministries, they will drink tea and look for pistachio salt in the old Mandai market. And they will look for Ashqaam-wa-arifam, the small temple dedicated to two lovers who were killed by their fathers because they belonged to rival clans (it was before the coming of Islam) While Roshana looks for whatever remains of the old French school, Hasibullah will visit a favourite old quarter called Kharabat, which is inhabited exclusively by a tribe of musicians.

Back home in Montreal, we will see Hasibullah and Roshana, fired up by what they saw and heard in Kabul, persuading government agencies and community groups to support their projects, selecting half a dozen teachers and social animators to join the staff at the new school, and wrestling with the question as to who in the family goes back with them in the fall, and for how long. Roshana would like both her mother and her brother Saif to teach for at least the first term. Nahila will have to decide whether the time is ripe for getting into the hotel business in Kabul.

The climax of the film will of course come with the opening of Roshana's school and the launching of Hasibullah's cultural exchange. But it will not be a Hollywood ending. Once the programmes are under way, they will have the time and strength to come to terms with the worst nightmare of their past--their escape from Kabul in 1982. They will ask their father to take them on the route they followed at night that horrible week, disguised in peasant clothes, tied as children to the backs of mules they didn't know how to ride, dismounting to climb hills so steep that their feet swelled and bled, passing through valleys full of rotting corpses, sleeping in puddles during the day, crossing the river at the frontier on a raft floating on inflated cow hides, and pulled against a strong current by a 50-year-old man. They want to try to find that man, as well as the Pashtun peasant family near Jalalabad who fed them and bandaged their wounds when they were at their half-way point, and who gave them the courage to continue. They want to tell these people that the help they gave the Fazels, even though they were urbanized Tajiks, instilled in them a belief in the possibility of building a peaceful inter-ethnic society in Afghanistan once all the foreign powers were gone. They want to tell them about their hope that the creative school for orphans in Kabul and the cultural exchange with friends in Canada will help ensure that nightmares like the one they all lived through will never happen in Afghanistan again.

SCHEDULE

February-March, 2002--shoot Festival of Kurban and complete research. I need to meet with the rest of the Fazel family, with two eminent Afghan scholars who live in Montreal (Dr. Shams, a historian, and Mr. Zabat, an economist), with Mesdames Pépin and Lalonde, with SUCO-Québec, with le Centre International de Brossard, with les Psychologues sans frontières, and with the Sufi centre on Park Avenue.

April--first principal shoot in Montreal

May--first shoot in Kabul

June--second shoot in Montreal

September--second shoot in Kabul

October-December, 2002--post-production

*Nov. 21 - beginning of filming
Montréal calendar
Belch Montréal, Baldoni
lunch day of 1200 BC
mixed with Islamic
Afghan concert -*